UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/AC.241/21
23 March 1994

Original: ENGLISH/SPANISH

INTERGOVERNMENTAL NEGOTIATING COMMITTEE FOR THE ELABORATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION IN THOSE COUNTRIES EXPERIENCING SERIOUS DROUGHT AND/OR DESERTIFICATION, PARTICULARLY IN AFRICA
Fourth session
Geneva, 21-31 March 1994
Agenda item 2

ELABORATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION IN COUNTRIES EXPERIENCING SERIOUS DROUGHT AND/OR DESERTIFICATION, PARTICULARLY IN AFRICA

Note verbale dated 7 March 1994 from the Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations in New York addressed to the Secretary-General

The Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations presents its compliments to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and has the honour to transmit herewith the official English and Spanish versions of the Almería Statement on Desertification and Migration, adopted at the International Symposium on Desertification and Migrations, held in Almería, Spain, from 9 to 11 February 1994.

The Permanent Mission of Spain would be grateful if the Secretary-General would have the statement circulated as an official document of the forthcoming session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in those counties experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa, to be held in Geneva, beginning 21 March 1994.

The Permanent Mission of Spain takes this opportunity to convey to the Secretary-General the renewed assurances of its highest consideration.

International Symposium

on

Desertification and Migrations

Almería, Spain - 9 to 11 February 1994

11 February 1994

THE ALMERIA STATEMENT ON DESERTIFICATION AND MIGRATION

Following upon the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, and based on recommendations contained in agenda 21, particularly its chapter 12 on "Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Combating Desertification and Drought", the General Assembly of the United Nations decided to establish an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa (Res. 47/188, 22 December 1992).

Desertification is a global phenomenon, affecting all continents, engendering cross-boundary and transcontinental migrations, forcing people in vulnerable areas marginalized by poverty and ecological degradation to look for better living opportunities in cities, other regions or other countries, where further strain on the natural and social environments are apt to occur.

The issue confronting the people who inhabit affected arid lands must be addressed by the international community. The General Assembly of the United Nations called for an International Conference on Population and Development (Res. 47/176, 22 December 1992). The Preparatory Committee of the Conference has identified "Population distribution and Migrations" amongst its priority issues.

Migration is, of course, a natural phenomenon in human history. The concern of the Symposium is that forced migrations resulting from arid-land degradation, and their consequences, often exhibit undesirable dimensions, both at the poles of origin and at the sites of relocation.

The number of migrants in the world, already at very high levels, none the less continues to increase by about 3 million each year. Approximately half of these originate in Africa. These increases are largely of rural origin and related to land degradation. It is estimated that over 135 million people may be at risk of being displaced as a consequence of severe desertification.

Therefore a holistic approach of local development, empowering the local population and protecting the environment within the context of a poverty-reduction strategy, should be combined with more effective migration policies in such areas.

SOCIO-POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

The human population is projected to double within the next 50 years and the global economic output to increase even more rapidly. In that context, the emerging trend in over-use of renewable resources may accelerate at a speed unprecedented in human history. Evidence is emerging for a correlation between poverty, desertification and conflicts of various kinds in arid and semi-arid areas. The common ground is the process of exclusion of vulnerable groups, who are subject to suffering, oppression, and dependency on fragile ecosystems under stress.

Of the 50 or so armed conflicts currently in progress, some 20 have an environmental dimension or are partly environmentally induced. Half of the latter are associated with arid lands. Many of these armed conflicts are often overlooked by central governments and the world at large.

Resulting social and political turbulence, set in motion by the exploitation and degradation of natural resources, is likely to become a major factor in geo-political instability.

Migration into cities or onto marginal lands accelerates the impoverishment of land, resources and people. This may lead to persistent upheaval or further migration, stimulating ethnic conflicts or social unrest elsewhere.

Environmental problems created at local or regional levels and related conflicts exert ever-increasing pressures on political stability at regional levels.

POLICY PRIORITIES

Inasmuch as the massive displacement of persons as refugees or otherwise in arid and semi-arid lands imposes severe pressures on scarce natural resources of those regions, effective integrated assistance strategies should link relief programmes with local development schemes.

Sustainable land-use planning and management in drylands prone to desertification should focus on vegetation, soil and water conservation strategies which are ecologically sound and agricultural practices which are economically viable, taking fully into consideration traditional knowledge and the participation of the local population.

Prevention of involuntary desertification-induced migration should rely on the promotion of sustainable agriculture and range management in arid lands through the provision of financing, technology, capacity-building and economic incentives.

Regional planning should harmonize agricultural production with the development of small and medium-scale towns in rural areas. Furthermore, urgent attention should be given to a better understanding of the dynamic relationship between population, migration and desertification.

Legislative, institutional and regulatory measures should be pursued to reform land tenure, conservation codes, harvesting, land use and water management practices, and should further empower local rural communities to enable them to participate in the recommended changes in land management.

There is a need to review the legal status and regulatory regime governing the ever-growing number of environmental migrants and displaced persons and to identify options for their protection and relief, helping returnees and assisting others with their integration into host communities.

ACTION PRIORITIES

The relationship between environmental degradation and migration is important, complex, yet little understood. Further research and investigation of desertification as both a cause and a consequence of displacement and cross-border migrations should thus be pursued through programmes facilitating the exchange of technical and scientific data and the constant monitoring of the process.

Such programmes should encourage comparative studies between affected regions with different cultural and economic constraints, establish an historical perspective and foster environmental education and training initiatives in affected areas, with a view towards developing successful models.

Research on desertification-induced population movements should seek to disaggregate primary factors motivating migration, and should quantify and analyse size, geographic origin, frequency of displacement, gender and age data and patterns of resource use in arid lands.

Surveys of dryland ecosystems should investigate the correlation between desertification, poverty and migration and become part of an early-warning system for humanitarian crises in the making.

Prospective analysis of existing or future conflict potential should include a careful assessment of the differences between temporary flight and permanent migration; and between internally displaced persons, cross-boundary and transcontinental migrations.

Research should be translated into policy-oriented training and dissemination programmes that bring into focus adapted technologies and biotechnologies meeting long-term ecological and climatological constraints and other priority matters.

IN CONCLUSION

Faithful to the concept of a global environment, and aware of the crucial interactions between socio-economic factors and major environmental problems, the participants of the International Symposium of Almería are convinced that the challenge of desertification must be addressed in a comprehensive manner, taking also into account the complex issue of environmentally-related migrations.

The Symposium believes that fundamental to the issue of desertification and migration is the fact that many people wish to be able to have the freedom to stay at home, on their land, in their own culture. This is particularly the case in ensuring the family stability. The Symposium believes that the corollary of the recognized right of freedom of movement is the right to remain.

The Symposium recommends that the negotiation process of the Convention to Combat Desertification give greater attention to the phenomenon of desertification-induced migration, at the local, regional and global levels.

Finally, the participants of the Almería Symposium noted with pleasure that Spain - being itself affected by desertification and owing to its geographic location and cultural links with many affected countries in the world - is offering to contribute concretely to a more effective fight against desertification within the framework of the Convention.